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ABSTRACT

This research brief highlights studies of nationally- and locally-based youth mentoring programs. The programs were evaluated on an experimentally based design which compared a group of youth randomly assigned to a mentoring program with a group of youth who were not so assigned. The study found overall that mentoring programs can be effective tools for enhancing the positive development of youth. Mentored youth are likely to have fewer absences from school; better attitudes towards school; fewer incidents of hitting others; less alcohol and drug use; and improved relationships with their parents or caregivers. One cautionary note was that mentoring of short duration might do more harm than good. Considerations that policymakers and practitioners may want to keep in mind are addressed. The most important policy consideration suggested is that, in general, mentoring programs are worth the investment. (Contains 19 references.) (JDM)

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Child Trends Research Brief

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Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development

By Susan M. Jekielek, M.A., Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D., Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., and Harriet J. Scarupa, M.S.

February 2002

Interest in mentoring is at an all-time high, with these programs touted as a way to help kids who seem at risk for trouble get on the right track, and also as a way for successful adults to "give something back" to their communities. But popularity does not necessarily equate with effectiveness, which brings us to a critical question: Do mentoring programs work? Or, to put it another way: Are young people who participate in these programs better off because of this participation?

To address these questions, Child Trends reviewed studies of ten youth mentoring programs, including both nationwide and locally based programs. Our conclusions about program impacts are based on experimentally designed evaluations. These evaluations compare youth randomly assigned to a mentoring program with a group of similar youth who were not so assigned. Seven studies conducted on five of these programs used an experimental design to evaluate the programs. Our conclusions about effective program approaches, however, are generally based on non-experimental analyses.

This Research Brief *brings together highlights from these multiple studies. The overarching finding from this research is that mentoring programs can be effective tools for enhancing the positive development of youth. Mentored youth are likely to have fewer absences from school, better attitudes towards school, fewer incidents of hitting others, less drug and alcohol use, more positive attitudes toward their elders and toward helping in general, and improved relationships with their parents. But the research also sounds some cautionary notes. For example, it suggests that mentoring relationships of short duration may do more harm than good. Also, in most programs, mentoring was augmented with other services, such as academic support.*

We conclude this brief with some considerations that policy makers and practitioners may want to keep in mind as they address the needs of at-risk youth.

THE FOUNDATION OF MENTORING

All children need caring adults in their lives. Although positive, sustained relationships with parents represent a critical resource for children, other adults can provide support that is similar to the support that a parent provides. This support from other adults can either be in addition to that provided by a parent or in place of support that a parent refuses or is unable to give. For example, other adults can provide financial assistance, enhance children's learning skills, and help build their self-esteem and self-control. They can also provide emotional support, advice, and guidance about subjects that adolescents might feel uncomfortable, apprehensive, or fearful discussing with their parents.[1]

Such involvement may be especially important for at-risk youth, that is, young people from poor, struggling, often single-parent families who live in neighborhoods that offer few positive outlets and a limited number of positive role models. Mentoring programs can be seen as formal mechanisms for establishing a positive relationship with at least one caring adult. Indeed, mentoring is often defined as a sustained relationship between a young person and an adult in which the adult provides the young person with support,

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guidance, and assistance.[2] The very foundation of mentoring is the idea that if caring, concerned adults are available to young people, youth will be more likely to become successful adults themselves.[3]

THE SCOPE OF MENTORING

Although all mentoring programs aim to promote positive youth outcomes, they vary somewhat in their goals, emphasis, and structure. Some programs have broad youth development goals, while others focus more narrowly on improving academic performance, helping youth stay in school, preparing youth for a particular line of work, or reducing substance abuse and other anti-social behaviors. Some programs are unstructured; others are highly structured. The programs whose evaluations we reviewed run the gamut. (See accompanying box for brief descriptions of these programs.) These programs do have a lot in common, though. Most are community-based, in contrast to school-based, and most target an "at-risk" population.

Many of the evaluations of these programs were conducted by Public/Private Ventures. One was conducted by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, and another by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. See *References* for complete citations for the program evaluations.

THE IMPACT OF MENTORING

We drew from evaluations of these programs to assess the effects of mentoring in three major areas that are critical to young people's success in life: educational achievement; health and safety; and social and emotional development. We restrict our assessment of impacts for youth well-being to randomized experimental evaluations.[4,5]

Before highlighting these outcomes, we offer a caveat. While Big Brothers/Big Sisters and The Buddy System are purely mentoring programs, in the other programs whose evaluations we reviewed, one-on-one mentoring is only one part

Programs Evaluated by Experimental Methods

Across Ages, based in Philadelphia, targets 6th-graders in distressed areas for mentoring by an older adult, with a special emphasis on reducing substance abuse and other antisocial behaviors.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters operates nationwide. This well-known, highly structured program promotes positive youth development through one-on-one mentoring for 5- to 18-year-olds who come primarily from single-parent families.

The Buddy System, based in Hawaii, used adults from the community to serve as mentors for 10-to-17-year-olds with behavior and academic problems. The program is no longer in existence.

Building Essential Life Options through New Goals (BELONG) provided opportunities for middle-school and junior-high students to be mentored by undergraduates from Texas A& M University in an effort to improve school performance and prevent substance abuse. The program is no longer operating.

Career Beginnings, with programs in six cities, targets 11th- and 12th-grade students for mentoring by an adult, as well as other activities designed to prepare students for further education and future employment.

Programs Evaluated by Quasi-experimental or Non-experimental Methods

Campus Partners In Learning, (which is no longer in existence) brought together college students and 4th- to 9th-graders for mentoring and group activities aimed both at improving young people's academic and social outcomes and boosting college students' leadership skills. It operated nationally.

The Hospital Youth Mentoring Program, taps volunteers who work in hospitals in cities across the nation to mentor young people (ages 14-22), to encourage them to stay in school, introduce them to hospital-based careers, and, in other ways, support their positive development.

Linking Lifetimes, which no longer operates but was a forerunner to the Across Ages program, used older people to mentor at-risk youth and young offenders. The program was based in Philadelphia.

Raising Ambition Instills Self-Esteem (RAISE), based in Baltimore, provides long-term (seven years) mentoring, educational, and recreational activities for young people, beginning in the 6th grade.

Sponsor-A-Scholar uses mentoring, academic support, and financial assistance to help students from Philadelphia public high schools stay in school and enroll in college. As with RAISE, the program emphasizes long-term participation, in this case, from 9th grade through college enrollment.

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of a comprehensive strategy to improve youth outcomes. Other parts of that strategy might include workshops for parents, a life-skills curriculum for youth, individual tutoring, or financial support for college, for example. So it could be that other factors in addition to mentoring itself might have contributed to the documented outcomes.

Educational Achievement

Because academic achievement is a key predictor of socioeconomic status, it is not surprising that many mentoring programs emphasize improving the academic and cognitive skills of young people. What the evaluations found:

Overall, youth participating in mentoring relationships experience positive academic returns.

- **Better attendance.** Youth participating in mentoring programs had fewer unexcused absences from school than did similar youth not participating in these programs. For example, youth in Big Brothers/Big Sisters skipped half as many days of school as did the control youth. And youth participating in the Across Ages program showed a gain of more than a week of attended classes, compared with non-program youth. Such results were consistent across all three studies that examined attendance.
- **Better chance of going on to higher education.** An evaluation of Career Beginnings, an academically oriented program, found that participants were somewhat more likely to attend college than non-participant youth. Of youth enrolled in this program, for example, 53 percent were enrolled in college the first year after high school graduation, compared with 49 percent in the control group.
- **Better attitudes toward school.** Two evaluations of the Across Ages program each showed that mentored youth had better attitudes toward school than non-mentored youth. In addition, teachers viewed youth mentored in the BELONG program as placing a higher value on school than non-mentored youth.

Further evaluation is needed to confirm whether mentoring improves grades. Youngsters who were mentored through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program experienced modest gains in their GPAs over time. These gains were strongest among minority females, who had GPAs of about a "B-" compared to a "C+" for minority females who were not in the program. However, youth did not have significantly better grades as a result of their participation in Across Ages. Youth mentored through the BELONG program were less likely to fail math, but not other subjects.

Health and Safety

The main health and safety outcomes targeted by mentoring programs are those related to substance use and delinquent behavior. What the evaluations found:

Mentoring approaches show promise in the prevention of substance abuse. The experience of Big Brothers/Big Sisters is again illustrative. Youth mentored through these programs were 46 percent less likely than youth in a control group to initiate drug use during the period of the study (18 months). For minority youth, the impact was even stronger. They were *70 percent* less likely to initiate drug use than other similar minority youth who were not in the program. The same pattern was found with alcohol use. Youth in Big Brothers/Big Sisters were 27 percent less likely than control group youth to initiate alcohol use during the study period. Female minority youth in the program were about half as likely as other minority females to do so. Two other studies also examined substance use. One showed a similar pattern; the other found that mentored youth were less likely than non-mentored youth to initiate drug use over the long-term, but not in the short-term.

Mentoring relationships appear to reduce *some* negative youth behaviors. Of the four programs that evaluated behaviors related to delinquency, all showed evidence of reducing some, but not all, of the negative behaviors examined. Mentored youth in the BELONG program committed fewer misdemeanors and

felonies after program participation (offenses were reduced from 4 percent to 1 percent). In the case of Buddy System participants, youth with a prior offense history were less likely to commit a major offense as a result of program assignment (38 percent compared with 64 percent of control group youth). Using the Big Brothers/Big Sisters example, youth who were mentored were almost one-third less likely to hit someone than youth who were not. Results from a study of the Across Ages program indicate similarly that youth participating in mentoring programs were less likely to engage in what is described as "problem behavior."

Some specific negative behaviors, however, appear to be unaffected by participation in mentoring programs. For example, there were no significant differences between youth mentored through Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the control group on such measures as how often the youth stole or damaged property over the past year, were sent to the office at school for disciplinary reasons, were involved in a fight, cheated, or used tobacco.

Social and Emotional Development

Mentoring enhances many aspects of young people's social and emotional development. What the evaluations found:

Participating in mentoring promotes positive social attitudes and relationships. For example, youth who received mentoring (in addition to other program activities) through the Across Ages program had significantly more positive attitudes toward school, the future, the elderly, and helping behaviors than youth in the comparison group; this finding is consistent in both studies that examine these outcomes. One additional study evaluated the impact of mentoring programs on the social relationships of youth. This study found that participants in Big Brothers/Big Sisters felt that they trusted their parents more and communicated better with them. Participants also felt they had better emotional support from their friends than youth who were not involved in the program. This latter finding was especially true for minority males.

Mentoring relationships do not consistently improve young people's perceptions of their worth. Findings on this outcome across three studies are inconclusive; however, one of these studies provides some insight into how mentoring programs may indirectly influence young people's sense of self-worth. That study – an evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters – found that mentoring improved parental relationships and scholastic confidence, which then not only enhanced young people's academic performance but also their overall sense of self-worth.

LESSONS FOR AND FROM MENTORING

Mentoring is not always effective at enhancing youth development. Non-experimental methods – which lack the rigor of the experimental methods that produced the impact findings reported above – can nevertheless provide insights into the specific characteristics and practices that may make the difference between a mentoring program that works and one that doesn't. Here we draw two sets of lessons from these studies.

Characteristics of Successful Mentoring Relationships

The longer the mentoring relationship, the better the outcome. For example, an analysis of Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs showed that, compared to non-mentored youth, "Little Brothers" and "Little Sisters" involved in mentoring relationships that lasted more than 12 months felt more confident about doing their schoolwork, skipped fewer school days, had higher grades, and were less likely to start using drugs or alcohol. Youth in one-on-one mentoring relationships of shorter duration (3-6 months) experienced no significant improvements in academic, social, and substance use outcomes. Those involved in relationships of even briefer duration actually felt less confident about doing their schoolwork and had a substantially lower sense of self-worth.[6,7]

Youth are more likely to benefit if mentors maintain frequent contact with them and know their families. Young people whose mentors contacted them most often had significantly better outcomes than comparison groups on a range of indicators: higher grades, college attendance, greater confidence about schoolwork, fewer school absences, and less initiation of drug use.[8] In contrast, young people who saw or spoke rarely with their mentors experienced no benefits from program participation, and may even have experienced harm. For example, they showed lower self-esteem, compared with non-participants.[9] In much the same way, a study of the Sponsor-A-Scholar program found that young people who said their mentors knew their parents well had higher GPAs and higher levels of college attendance than young people for whom this was not the case. Consider just college attendance. Youth who felt that their mentors knew their family well were almost one and one-half times more likely to enroll in college than those who said their mentors did not. Even more striking, these youth were about three times more likely to be attending college two years after high school graduation.

Young people who perceive high-quality relationships with their mentors experience the best results. Studies of multiple mentoring programs show that young people with the most positive perceptions about these relationships earned higher grades, were considered to be better students, were more likely to go to college, and were less likely to start using drugs and alcohol. Those who ranked these relationships in the "moderately-positive" range experienced improvements on some academic and behavioral measures. Those who gave these relationships the lowest ranking showed virtually no positive results.

Overall, young people who are the most disadvantaged or at-risk seem to benefit the most from mentoring. Consider the Sponsor-A-Scholar experience. Participants in the program who made the most gains were those who had fewer resources already at their disposal. That is, these young people came from families that provided them with the least support, attended some of the poorest-performing schools, had the lowest initial GPAs, and were the least motivated when they first became involved in the program. Yet after being mentored, 9th graders who entered the program with the lowest GPAs improved their grades in school significantly and, two years after high school graduation, were more likely to attend college than similar youth in the control group. Young people who entered the program with good grades and attendance records remained on a plateau; they didn't drop behind on these measures, but they didn't advance either. Similar patterns were found for participants in Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs.

While research indicates that the most disadvantaged youth seem to benefit the most from mentoring programs, we do need to keep a qualification in mind: Some very at-risk young people did not make it into the Sponsor-A-Scholar program. To be eligible, youth had to show evidence of motivation and had to be free of problems that would tax the program beyond its capabilities. Such a threshold for participation was common across different programs.

Program Practices that Enhance Quality Mentoring

Mentoring programs need structure and planning to facilitate high levels of interaction between young people and their mentors.[10] Supervision of the match was the program practice most associated with close mentoring relationships. Mentors and their mentees met at the highest rates in programs that provided regular supervision, and at the lowest rates when such supervision was lacking or inadequate. Poorly supervised matches were also more likely to be disbanded because of loss of interest. Training for mentors both before and after they are matched with youth also appears to be key to successful mentoring relationships. Mentors who received the most hours of training had longer lasting matches.

Mentoring programs that are driven more by the needs and interests of youth – rather than the expectations of the adult volunteers – are more likely to succeed. Programs based on a "developmental" approach to mentoring, instead of a "prescriptive" approach, tended to last longer and be more satisfying for both mentor and mentee. In the developmental approach, mentors spent a lot of time initially getting to know their mentees, were flexible in their expectations of the relationships, and took their cues about what activities they would engage in with their mentees from the youth themselves. In the prescriptive approach, mentors viewed *their* goals for the match as paramount and required the youth to take equal responsibility for maintaining the relationship and assessing how it was working out. An in-depth, nine-month study of 82 Big Brothers/Big Sisters matches found that matches based on a prescriptive approach developed growing tension, which led, in part, to the abandonment of the relationship. Two-thirds of the mentors and mentees in prescriptive matches no longer met nine months after the first study interview, whereas only about 10 percent of the developmental relationships had ended.

SUMMARY

We looked across a series of well-designed, rigorous evaluations that provide evidence about and insights into the effects of mentoring programs on at-risk youth in three broad areas: educational achievement; health and safety; and social and emotional development. Because so much of the success of these programs depends on the quality of mentor-mentee relationships, we also looked at studies that identify program practices and characteristics that appear to promote positive mentoring relationships. By a number of indices – for example, school attendance and attitudes, relationships with parents and peers, behavior in relation to drug and alcohol use – many mentoring programs seem to be doing a good job at improving youth outcomes. Not all mentoring relationships are successful for reasons that may range from a lack of program structure, to a lack of training and supervision for mentors, to a lack of commitment. However, sustained, positive relationships with regular interaction, flexibility, and a focus on the interests and needs of the mentee appear to be successful. The overwhelming conclusion that can be drawn from the evidence is that mentoring programs can be beneficial to at-risk youth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The most important policy implication that emerges from our review of rigorous experimental evaluations of mentoring programs is that these programs appear to be worth the investment. The finding that highly disadvantaged youth may benefit the most from mentoring programs reinforces this point. In light of such evidence, policy makers, educators, social service providers, and members of the general public who are concerned about improving the life chances of at-risk youth have good reason to implement and support these programs. But in doing so, they should keep a few considerations in mind.

One consideration is the need to ensure that the *supply* of mentors matches the potential *demand* for mentors. While research underscores the value of mentoring relationships, the pool of adults currently willing and able to serve as mentors is limited. Many successful professionals, who might make excellent role models for at-risk youth, may feel they are unable to make the required time commitment. Retirees might have the time to serve as mentors but might have minimal discretionary funds to spend on typical mentoring activities, such as going with their mentees to movies, museums, professional sporting events, or restaurants. College students may have direct access to university facilities and may have special empathy for young people, but might find it difficult to make a long-term commitment to mentoring and might have little access to transportation. In addition, some potential mentors might be afraid to venture into the neighborhoods that are most in need of positive role models for youth. Policy makers and administrators of youth programs need to address such constraints.

A second consideration is to recognize that successful mentoring goes beyond recruiting mentors and matching them with youth. Maintaining young people's enthusiasm for and interest in these relationships is equally vital to keeping youth involved

long enough to benefit from mentoring. Here, careful and ongoing program implementation is the key, as the research findings suggest. Such implementation includes building a highly qualified staff and a strong infrastructure. This, in turn, makes it possible to provide screening of potential mentors, effective training for mentors, follow-up to ensure that mentors and mentees meet regularly, and proactive monitoring of mentoring relationships so that program staff can help solve problems before they lead to the dissolution of these relationships.

All of this takes money, which leads to our final consideration. Quality mentoring doesn't come cheap. According to one estimate, a quality mentoring program has a median cost of about $1,000 annually per youth, not including donated time and resources.[11] Yet, given the documented positive outcomes from mentoring at-risk youth, government agencies, foundations, and generous individuals may want to find ways to increase their support of well-implemented mentoring programs.

CONCLUSION

There is an expanding knowledge base about mentoring programs, as this *Research Brief* confirms, but there are still unanswered questions. For example: Is group mentoring as successful as one-on-one mentoring? Are some types of mentoring activities more effective than others? How does effective mentoring "look different" when implemented for different age groups? How can effective mentors be recruited? What is the optimal staff and budget needed to recruit, train, and support mentors? Further research to address such questions may be helpful to those seeking to implement these programs.

Meanwhile, those involved in developing policies and practices to help at-risk youth might occasionally want to revisit the rationale for mentoring programs. One way to do that is to relate mentoring to that line from a song immortalized by jazz great Billie Holiday: "God bless the child who's got his own." Children who have "got their own" – in the sense of having adults in their lives who care about them, are willing and able to nurture their development, and are good role models for them – have the best chance of growing up to become responsible, productive, caring adults themselves.

This *Research Brief* summarizes a longer report by Susan M. Jekielek, M.A., Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., and Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., which was prepared for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. This report draws on evaluations of mentoring programs by Public/Private Ventures, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. For more information on this report, *Mentoring Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis*, call the Child Trends' publications office, 202-362-5580.

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Endnotes

[1] Allen, J., Aber, J., & Leadbeater, B. (1990). Adolescent problem behaviors: The influence of attachment and autonomy. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America 13*, 455-467.

[2] For example, see Mentoring, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Research Consumer Guide Number 7 at www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/Consumer Guides/mentor.html.

[3] Scales, P., & Gibbons, J. (1996). Extended family members and unrelated adults in the lives of young adolescents: A research agenda. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 16*(4), 365-389.; Furstenberg, Frank (1993). How families manage risk and opportunity in dangerous neighborhoods. In W. J. Wilson (Ed.), *Sociology and the Public Agenda* (pp. 231-258). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.; Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 57*, 316-331.

[4] No evaluation strategy has been identified that can approximate the results provided by a well-implemented random assignment experimental design (Hollister, R.G., & Hill, J. 1995. Problems in the evaluation of community-wide initiatives. In J. P. Connell, A. C. Kubisch, L.B. Schorr, & C. H. Weiss (Eds.), *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Concepts, methods and contexts*. New York: The Aspen Institute.) Over the past decade, a number of researchers have attempted to duplicate the results from experimental studies using a variety of other non-experimental approaches, with unsatisfactory, even contradictory, results. For references to these studies, see the full report (*Mentoring Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis*).

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[8]Additional methodological criteria include: a minimum of 25 youth per program and control group and a minimum retention rate of 60 percent. Studies focused on special populations (e.g., adolescents with severe physical challenges) were also excluded.

[9]These findings are from studies of multiple mentoring programs.

[10]The reasons for adverse effects from mentoring relationships that dissolve quickly are not understood fully. One plausible explanation is that young people who have experienced unsatisfactory or rejecting parental and adult relationships in the past may develop fears and doubts about whether others will accept and support them; and mentoring relationships that aren't successful have the potential to reinforce these fears.

[11]These findings are from studies of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Sponsor-A-Scholar programs.

[12]As found in studies of Sponsor-A-Scholar and multiple programs.

[13]The findings reported in this section come from studies of multiple mentoring programs.

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